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**Looking at Student Work** Pages 56-60

## How I Learned to Be Strategic about Writing Comments

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**By setting up ways to get frequent feedback from students' works in progress, we can find out what they need—before it's too late.**

Several years ago, I decided that if I were going to spend time writing comments on my students' writing work or on assignments connected to their in-class reading, those comments had to do more than justify a grade. They had to give targeted feedback that would show students how to improve the quality of their work.

I'd been finding the hours I spent writing feedback on students' work discouraging. For one thing, students didn't pay attention to my comments, and, for another, the quality of their work wasn't improving. A change in how I responded to their work was necessary.

If I wanted my comments to fuel improvement, I realized, I had to build in time for learners to revise their work after receiving my suggestions. Not only did I change the timing of my feedback, but I also streamlined my process of writing comments, allowing myself more time to shift instruction in response to what I'd learned from reviewing work.

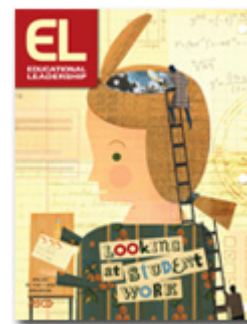
### Lessons from a Coach

A conversation I overheard last fall between two teachers who were also coaches helped me think how I might improve my feedback. During a break from the professional development session, I overheard this exchange between the head basketball coach and the offensive coordinator for the school's football team:

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR: David [the quarterback] comes to dinner on Sunday nights.

HEAD BASKETBALL COACH: Really, why?

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR: After we eat, we go over game films. I have a chart with the plays numbered on a clipboard. We review each offensive series, and in between plays, we stop and David talks about what he thinks went well and what he would change if he had another chance.

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HEAD BASKETBALL COACH: Interesting.

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR: If David thinks the play was executed well, he puts a checkmark next to its number, and we move on to the next one. If he doesn't think the play went well, we talk about his options. He jots down notes on what to practice and pay attention to the following week.

At this point, I saw the connection between the way this coach reviewed a player's performance and the ideal way teachers might review students' work. "That's a great idea," I thought. Talk about using reflection to improve performance! The quarterback is the ultimate user of the game film and the coach's expertise. He's getting a chance to reflect on his performance, and the coach is giving him a chance to use his feedback to improve what he does for the next game.

In a perfect world, teachers and students would work together toward a common goal, like athletes and coaches do. Students would care about the feedback we give them as much as we do. Like most teachers, I don't live in that perfect world—but I've made changes to how I teach and how I guide teachers in my current role as an instructional coach and consultant.

## Putting Time Where It Matters

First I realized that I needed to use my time where it matters most. By spending the majority of my time grading final papers and assessments, I was missing too many chances to help students get better. Where I really needed to give feedback was *before* final assignments were due. I needed a chance to reteach concepts, and students needed a chance to revise.

This was true for both reading and writing assignments. I decided to build in opportunities to help students as they read complex texts, not just give a final test on our class novel.

I now use frequent "comprehension checks," which some students refer to as quizzes, throughout reading assignments. These checks always use the same four-question format, measuring how well students can summarize, analyze the author's craft, annotate a text, and make inferences.

For a reading selection from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, for instance, the check might use these four questions:

1. Please summarize what you read. List five to six plot points.
2. Throughout the chapter, the narrator describes what the soldier looked and acted like when he was alive. What purpose might this serve? Try to infer what the author is hoping to convey to readers.
3. Read the following passage and annotate it in the margin to show your thinking: "If he could not fight little boys, he thought, how could he ever become a soldier and fight the Americans with their planes and helicopters and bombs? In the presence of his father and uncles he pretended to look forward to doing his patriotic duty ... but at night he prayed with his mother that the war might end soon."
4. Discuss how this quote connects to a bigger idea or reflects a particular theme.

My goal with this structured comprehension check is to give students a purpose for their reading and a way to sift and sort what's important. I quickly grade each reading check and pass them back the next day. I don't spend lots of time writing comments because when I return reading checks, I give each student a completed answer key showing exemplar answers. Students compare my criteria of success with their performance and reflect on how my responses are alike or different from theirs.

## Looking for Patterns

Changing how I spend time with student work changed how I grade assignments. Writing teacher and author Kelly Gallagher once told me, "Improvement starts with volume. Volume suffers if I have to grade everything. Grading doesn't make kids better. Volume, choice, and conferring makes kids better." Kelly strives to help his students write four times more than he can grade.

I agree with Kelly. It's not only true that teachers can burn themselves out trying to give students feedback on everything, but it's also true that what's most essential to improving the quality of students' work is collecting feedback for ourselves from that work and noticing patterns in students' skills (or lack thereof) that we can use to determine our next instructional moves. I don't have to always write the perfect comment or give a grade.

If students bomb one of my four-question comprehension checks, for instance, I don't let them retake it because they've already seen my answers. Instead, I make a copy of the chapter that the comprehension check focused on and give students the opportunity to read and annotate it. We then quickly chat about their annotations. Each reader must show me what he or she noticed about the author's craft and how, as a reader, he or she went beyond plot to infer theme. On the basis of the quality of their annotations and our individual discussions, I add points to each student's original reading check grade.

When I remember that getting feedback is more powerful than giving feedback, the task of looking at student work is more manageable. According to John Hattie's (2009) synthesis of feedback research, teachers who spend hours giving feedback might not be getting the biggest bang for their buck. Hattie writes, "It was only when I discovered that feedback was most powerful when it was from the student to the teacher that I started to understand it better" (p. 173).

Now, as I teach or guide other teachers, my rule of thumb is: Give students daily opportunities to leave tracks of their thinking, use those tracks to notice patterns, and adjust instruction on the basis of what kids know and what they need. Repeat the cycle. I've developed the following processes and tools to check how students are really doing in their assigned reading and where they need help.

## Silent Reading Think Sheets

This tool captures students' thinking as they read their free-choice books or an assigned text. Stapling several sheets together helps me—and students themselves—see growth over time. When I confer with students, we can go back to their silent reading sheets and together discuss patterns of growth. I can tell whether students are sticking with a book or regularly abandoning books they've started. I can assess endurance and notice how summary writing skills are developing. I can also examine the quality of reading responses—which helps me know which students are pushing themselves and which are faking it.

See Figure 1 for a sample think sheet a middle school student completed after reading part of a text. From the student's responses, I can tell that he's just starting the book; that might be why the summary and response are so literal. I would plan to check on this student's next silent reading sheet to see whether he's going beyond plot to inferring or making predictions. The reading minutes and number of pages are good, but this novel is an easy book for this reader. I would monitor reading endurance and future book choices to see whether he's being pushed a bit more.

### Figure 1. Silent Reading Think Sheet

**Yearlong Target:** I can read to learn about myself and the world around me.

**Remember:** 67 minutes a day grows good readers!

**Learning Targets:**

1. I can improve my reading comprehension and stamina by sticking with a book I can read.
2. I can monitor my inner voice to help me remember what I read.
3. I can share how my reading reflects new thinking.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Book: **Crossover**

Page I started on **3** Page I ended on **35** Total pages read **32**

Time I started **8:00** Time I stopped **8:30** Total minutes **30 min**

How well did you meet the 2nd learning target? What made you stop reading? What do you remember reading?

**Two brothers who are twins love basketball, and they are actually the stars of their team. The boys are in middle school, and it seems like they will deal with middle school issues. The father is a former pro basketball player, and the mom is the vice principal of the school. I would have hated if I went to a school where my mom was the vice or assistant principal.**

How well did you meet the 3rd learning target? What were you thinking as you read? In at least FOUR sentences include: questions, connections, opinions, new thoughts, and/or ideas that you think are important.

**I bet as the book goes on, we'll see that the twins are opposites. Josh seems really stuck up. I'm not really sure about his brother Jordan. I'm totally confused on page 13. Is the backseat, the bus? Does Josh have dreads? Is that what he means by locks? I love the words on page 20. I think the quote is about trying your hardest with the things you love.**

## Exit Tickets

At the end of class, I ask students to write on a half sheet of paper one thing they figured out and one thing they wonder about related to the reading or the day's lesson, and turn this in. The first chance I have, I find a big table where I can sort the tickets into similar comments and questions. I read what students think they understood, for instance, to see if they left with the information I wanted them to know—or with misconceptions. Next, I look for patterns in their questions. Are the same questions coming up? Are there any unusual questions I could share with the class that might drive the next day's reading? Whose questions indicate that they're lost? I don't waste time writing comments; I simply look for patterns, and when I've figured out a few, I throw the tickets away.

I make a note to touch base with students who don't respond at all to ask them why. Did they run out of time? Did they not learn or wonder anything? Do they think I'm not interested in what they have to say?

## Response Journals

Students use individual composition notebooks to reflect on their learning for the day. Early in the year, I post questions for kids who may not be sure how to begin (such as, What worked for you today? What do you need to

keep going? What new information struck you? How will you use what you've learned today?)

Instead of taking everyone's journals home to respond to that evening, I look at and respond to a third of them during my planning period, take another third home, and look at the rest first thing in the morning. I limit my comments and challenge myself to identify patterns.

Exit tickets and response journals help teachers quickly assess student thinking. Both the most advanced students and the strugglers can use these tools to show their teacher what they know.

## Streamlining the Process

As I use each tool, I set parameters for myself. I decide beforehand which qualities of students' reading and thinking I want to analyze and give feedback on.

For instance, I often assign students to annotate a passage of a classwide text, demonstrating how well they are doing specific kinds of thinking. Before going through a stack of annotations, I set a limit for how many comments I'll give. As I read students annotations, I try to write questions that will push their thinking. I might ask why a character said what he said, or ask why they think a certain action happened. Sometimes, I write a quick comment to clear up misconceptions or label something students have done well so they can share the technique or thinking with a peer.

While commenting, I record what I notice on a piece of notebook paper divided into four columns. When three or more kids demonstrate a similar struggle, I make a note of it. Figure 2 (p. 60) shows a sample chart describing what I noticed as I read through students' annotations on a section of *The Great Gatsby*.

**Figure 2. Review of Students' Annotations to Passage from *The Great Gatsby*.**

Students' Use of Skills and Strategies	Confusing Vocabulary	Students' Questions Related to the Reading	Information to Skillfully Read a Genre or Text Structure
<p>A small group of kids aren't annotating (David, Xavier, Jose, and Shanille). Find out why.</p> <p>Lots of kids aren't using quotation marks to tell who is talking. They are losing track of the speaker.</p>	<p>Words students don't understand:</p> <p><i>love nest</i></p> <p><i>billow</i></p> <p><i>pompadour</i></p> <p><i>border</i></p> <p><i>scanty</i></p>	<p>Questions that show student confusion:</p> <p>What is the significance of the song on p. 95?</p> <p>Who is Dan Cody and what are his connections to Gatsby?</p>	<p>Students are reading the text literally.</p> <p>Do students understand the tone?</p> <p><b>Mini-lesson idea:</b> Students seem unsure of how authors show the inside of characters. Do students know to notice what characters say and do and to then infer traits?</p>

		Who is Klipspringer?	
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Source: From *So What Do They Really Know* (p. 95) by Cris Tovani, 2011, Portland, ME: Stenhouse. Copyright © 2011 by Cris Tovani. Adapted with permission.

After I complete a chart like this, I prioritize what students seem to need most. For each column, I try to determine what's important in this work, identify patterns, and get ideas for how I might change my instruction. For the "Skills and Strategies" column, for instance, I ask myself, Do students need models of weak and strong work? Do they need more instruction on how to use this strategy? More time to practice the skill before the final demonstrations of understanding?

In considering students' vocabulary use, I ask questions like, Are the words students don't know antiquated (and perhaps less important to teach) or high-frequency words? Are they rarely used words, or ones that will help readers understand complex ideas? Do the words have similar prefixes, suffixes, or roots that I can clump together into a word-part lesson?

In the column called "Students' Questions Related to the Reading," I consider whether knowing the answer to a question is necessary to understand the plot or a key concept. For example, in *The Great Gatsby* annotations, several students wanted to know who Dan Cody was. If students don't know this, it could interfere with comprehension, so I simply reminded them that Cody was the yacht owner Gatsby saved from drowning and then went on to work for—and he was a model for Gatsby on how to "act rich." If the same question keeps coming up for multiple students, it's worth addressing with the class. I consider how I might use that question to propel students to think.

And for the fourth column, on helping students read this genre skillfully, I identify the text structures students need to recognize.

## Getting Closer to that Perfect World

If you find yourself complaining about the amount of time you spend writing on students' work and frustrated that the work isn't getting better, ask yourself three questions: (1) Are you commenting on everything students produce—or limiting your responses to a few aspects at a time? (2) Are you using this review to notice patterns about students' strengths and weaknesses—and deciding what lessons to teach on the basis of those patterns? Or are you trying to fix everything for them? (3) Do students have an opportunity to revise after they get your feedback—or is it a one and done?

Since I've begun limiting my comments and using more time to peruse patterns of understanding, I've found that I have more time to plan how I'll build in opportunities along the way for students to show what they know. As much as we'd all like to coach kids one-on-one, we can't. Getting feedback from student work and giving students feedback to advance their learning are both essential, but educators have to be strategic in how we use these instructional moves. In the end, both teacher and students have to get smarter.

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